Jack Underwood on Jennifer L. Knox

It was the end of the summer of 2012, the wettest for a hundred years. The Olympics were done; Pussy Riot were on trial; a woman in Zaragoza had made world news for “restoring” a priceless fresco of Christ, so that it resembled Bertie Bassett, as foreseen in the nightmares of Edvard Munch, and then Neil Armstrong died. It felt oddly like the end of an era that no one had realised they’d been living through, like Christmas was over, only Christmas was a period of Western history following the Second World War, and in the miserable January of the new era the only person who seemed to know what to do was the guy campaigning on Facebook to arrest the warlord Joseph Kony, and even he would end up burnt out by October, naked and slapping the pavement, ranting about the devil in downtown San Diego.

Back in east London I was really feeling sorry for myself. My first manuscript had sweated on an editor’s desk for six months, only to be sent back with “must try harder” written in the margins, and Alt Lit had turned up like a lurid, new, sugary fruit drink we were all compelled to pretend didn’t give us migraines. How am I supposed to work in these conditions? I asked the remaining cat, the one we hadn’t found dead on our doorstep that July, the delivery man knocking, pointing down mutely. It was all getting a bit ‘Skunk Hour’, and while I’m not going to say something grand like “Jennifer L. Knox’s poems made me fall in love with life and poetry again”, it’s fair to say that her first two books, A Gringo Like Me and Drunk by Noon, were the chicken soup that kept me going that winter:

This morning Willard says there’s no place else he’d rather be than with beautiful ladies at a pie contest.

“What’s yer pie?” he growls to the petite 40ish Latina on his right, giving her a squeeze around the waist.
“A Splenda Blueberry Sweetiepie!” she says into the wrong camera, beaming.

(‘Children of the Blah Blah Blah Blah’, Drunk by Noon)

The first Knox poem I came across online was ‘I Am a Girl’ about a “little bird girl with a very, / very big dick... so big it must be checked / at the airport”. So far, so bird-penis, but what really struck me about the poem was how far Knox was prepared to advance the idea; behind the “big dick”, a “curtain draws back: / a cave, like the innards of a geode, / the walls wink and beep tiny lights. / You can’t fuck it unless you’re made / of numbers.” The irreverence of that kind of imagination made me feel that Anything Could Happen in her poems, which made all the other poetry I’d been reading, troubling over, measuring up to, feel dull, whiny, limited.

I knew I couldn’t write irreverently imaginative poems like Knox, and that was absolutely part of their appeal; reading them felt like being twelve again: nerdily tagging along with a friend’s cool big sister and watching in awe as she smokes in the kitchen in her bra, or leans through the window of a guy’s car just to tell him up close to go fuck himself. Badass. Smart. Yes, Knox’s poems made me feel like a little poetry chickenshit, just about allowed to vicariously get off on their sass, adventure and luxurious transgression:

Today I turn thirteen and quit the 4-H club for good.
I smoke way too much pot for that shit.
Besides, Mama lost the rabbit and both legs from the hip down in Vegas.
What am I supposed to do? Pretend to have a rabbit?
Bring an empty cage to the fair and say
His name’s REO Speedwagon and he weighs eight pounds?
My teacher, Mr. Ortiz says, I’ll miss you, Cassie,
then gives me a dime of free crank and we have sex.
I do up the crank with Mama and her boyfriend, Rick.
She throws me the keys to her wheelchair and says
Baby, go get us a chicken bucket.
So I go get us a chicken bucket.

(‘Chicken Bucket’, A Gringo Like Me)

To me, Knox’s aesthetic falls somewhere between Carson McCullers’s The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and John Waters’s film Pink Flamingos. Each voice carries its own tragedy, perversion, American darkness, whether it’s the family chiding their elderly father in ‘Pastoral With Internet Porn’ – “These nice girls just want to wash / some donkeys at $100 bucks a pop for their cheer- / leading
squad so try and relax and enjoy it!”; or the speaker of ‘Hot Ass Poem’ telling you, whether you like it or not, “Hey check out that dog’s ass wow that dog’s ass is hot that dog’s got a hot dog ass I want squeeze that dog’s ass like a ball but a hot ball a hot ass ball.”

The unsettling humour of Knox’s poems is a by-product of what Gabriel Gudding describes as her “satiric empathy”. The laughter her poems provokes is a kind of nervous laughter, at the “cultural horror she depicts with complicity as if she too were not entirely innocent of it” (to cite Bill Knott). Class and gender politics gnaw away in Knox’s poems: tangible, but kept complex, dissolved in the kitsch and weirdness:

Pass the meat to me, this spazz among spazzes.
What would I be without meat? A crybaby.
I cry when animals get hurt. I would never ever hunt anything.
Unless it was getting dark and I was hungry.
I’m totally freaking out.
I could come out and say I’m totally freaking out, but this is a poem,
so I will say, “Darker grows every leaf/hov’ring o’er the red, red meat.”
I’m one of those idiots who’s going blinder all the time.
(‘59 Tenets about Meat’, Drunk by Noon)

The role of humour in poetry is something Knox addresses in an excellent series of blogposts on funny women poets for Best American Poetry:

The funny poet questions the sanctity of our medium’s most revered trope: gravity. The graver the poem, the more important. Does the just plain stupid, irrational, ashamed, or lazy have any place in a poem? Never ever? I feel those feelings all the time… In life, no tone is constant, the line of thought always interrupted – the crucial by mundane, shame by egocentrism, peace by chaos. One moment, you’re sobbing in your living room, the next, remembering there’s a sale at the Gap.


It’s also worth noting the ingenuity and precisions of Knox’s image-making, as in ‘The Corgis Come and Go’ a high-camp lament in Drunk by Noon:

Now as the memory of their auburn fur
and all the ways my hand connected to it
sinks like a flaming car to the bottom
of my opaque frozen lake of feelings,
a new shape’s stirring.
And there is the surprising tidiness of her writing, despite its pace and the amount of stuff she packs in. She writes the way Dean Moriarty parks cars:

I found him in the backyard at midnight
wearing a foam rubber sun costume – no tights
or underwear on – one ball hanging out the leghole
like a jawbreaker in a baby sock.

(‘You’re F*cking Crazy’, The Mystery of the Hidden Driveway)

In her forthcoming book, Days of Shame and Failure, Knox seems more pissed off and sardonically barbed. There are sadder, more personal poems about her family, like the tender ‘Life’s Work’, but also grim, apocalyptic eco-poems such as ‘The New Twilight Zone: “Empty City”’, or ‘Indian Head’. The poems are still funny, but life and all its waste feels tiring, hard. Which is why a poet like Knox is so necessary, and why I find her work so restorative, because poetry is rarely as convincingly defiant in the face of all our bullshit:

[...] all the people at the bar and behind the desk began to clap and cheer, and I pivoted on my heel and marched out through the double glass doors where my unicorn was waiting and she was like, ‘How’d that feel?’ and I was like, ‘Amazing!’

(‘Ladies Night/Feelin’ Right’)

A Gringo Like Me (Soft Skull Press, 2005); Drunk by Noon (Bloof Books, 2007); The Mystery of the Hidden Driveway (Bloof Books, 2010); Days of Shame and Failure (Bloof Books) is published in September.